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# Social Embeddedness and Late-Life Parenthood

## Community Activity, Close Ties, and Support Networks

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This article focuses on the ways in which patterns of marriage and fertility shape older people's involvement in community groups and their support networks. The data are from Australia, Finland, Germany, Israel, Japan, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Findings show that childless older adults, regardless of marital status and gender, are equally as likely as parents to be active in the community and in voluntary organizations and to perform volunteer work. Never-married childless women are particularly active socially. Married, childless men are particularly dependent on their wives. In general, childless people are less likely than are parents to have robust network types capable of maintaining independent living without recourse to residential care during conditions of frailty. In some countries, it appears to be marriage rather than parenthood that makes the difference in support networks.

***Keywords:*** *childlessness; parenthood; support networks; community activity; marital history; late life*

Research has repeatedly underscored the importance of social embeddedness for adult well-being (Antonucci, 1990; Berkman, Glass, Brisette, & Seeman, 2000; House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988; Ryff & Singer, 2001; Uchino, 2004). Social embeddedness is created and sustained

through interactions with others—at home, at work, in the local community, at church, and in the family. The centrality of the latter in older adults' lives is undisputed (Mancini & Blieszner, 1989). Not only is the family a source of sociability, but it also provides a sense of connectedness across generations (Hagestad, 2003), linking young and old. In the family, the parent–child relationship is singled out as the most central (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Contact with children is a consistent predictor of older adults' quality of life (Farquhar, 1994). Adult children have been shown to be the most numerous categories of members in the networks of many elderly people (van Tilburg, 1995). After spouses, adult children (or children-in-law) are those most likely to provide support and care in all countries (Burholt, Wenger, Scott, Yahya, & Roy, 2000; Connidis, 1989b; Dykstra, 1990; Kendig, Koyano, Asakawa, & Ando, 1999; Neyer & Lang, 2003; Wenger & Liu, 2000).

Given the centrality of children in older adults' lives, it is surprising that so few studies have examined the social embeddedness of those who do not have these bonds. Little is known about how older adults who do not have children organize their social contacts and supports. The focus of this article is on the ways in which patterns of marriage and childbearing shape older adults' involvement in community groups, their close ties, and their support networks. Comparisons are drawn, insofar as the data allow doing so, between Australia, Finland, Germany, Israel, Japan, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States.[1]

## Childlessness and Social Vulnerability

It is often suggested that the childless are a socially vulnerable group precisely because they have no children. Not having children means not having access to one important source of support. It also means not having the links to others that children often provide (Furstenberg, 2005). Not surprisingly, family networks of those who have no children are typically smaller than those of parents (Dykstra, 2006; Mugford & Kendig, 1986;

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Wenger, Scott, & Patterson, 2000). Apart from providing immediate ties within the family (sons- and daughters-in-law, grandchildren), children often act as catalysts for involvement with relatives. Furthermore, children tend to serve as intermediaries to the broader social environment: the neighborhood, schools, and social services. For example, in a study of older widows who were all long-term residents of their neighborhoods, O'Bryant (1985) shows that those without children have less contact with their neighbors than do widows whose children live out of town but more contact than those with children living nearby. She argues that those without children might be less involved with their neighbors because during their younger years most had worked and lacked children to promote neighborly contact. Choi (1994) points to the role of adult children as their parents' advocates, facilitating access to services by acquiring necessary information and organizing service delivery. Apart from a "lifelong conditioning to self-sufficiency" (p. 362), this lack of advocates might explain the relatively low levels of service use among childless elderly found in her study.

There are several reasons for not equating childlessness in late life with social vulnerability. Many of the childless elderly have very close relationships with available kin or with non-kin, often sharing households (Chappell & Badger, 1989; Dykstra, 1995b; Wenger, 2001; Wenger et al., 2000). "Our findings do *not* support the view of older childless individuals as social isolates," write Connidis and McMullin (1992, p. 380) of older people in North America. Their evidence shows that when compared with older parents, older childless people go to public places (movies, restaurants, sports events) and travel as frequently and go on outings (events out of the home such as bingo, playing cards, taking a course) more frequently. In the authors' view, current patterns of social activity reflect patterns of involvement established earlier in life. Whereas their peers with children were kept more housebound by the responsibilities and obligations of child rearing, those without children were more active outside the home. The difference in orientation toward the home as a base for activity between those with and those without children may be maintained into later life.

Childless people and parents have varying kin resources from which to construct their support networks (Ikels, 1988; Wenger et al., 2000). Relationships with siblings are particularly important to those without children as they are also to those with only one child (Wenger, 2001) but appear to be most important to those who have never married (Connidis, 1989a; Ikels, 1988; Kendig, Coles, Pittelkow, & Wilson, 1988; Pickard, 1995; Strain & Payne, 1992). As those without children age and siblings die or become frail, contact with nephews and nieces may intensify, often with the

children of the sibling with whom the older person has been closest (Wenger, 1992; Wenger & Burholt, 2001). However, as Johnson and Troll (1992) point out, links to siblings' children do not always persist after the siblings' deaths. In general, relationships with nieces and nephews are casual unless the older person is childless (Wenger, 1993, 2001; Wenger & Burholt, 2001). Several studies have shown that older adults without children maintain more intensive contacts with extended family members such as cousins and nieces and nephews than parents do (Kendig, 1986), although such contacts are unlikely to be with all nieces and nephews, and those without children may single out one as their heir with whom they develop a particularly close relationship (Wenger et al., 2000).

The pattern emerging from the literature is that in the course of their lives, childless people tend to develop special ties with siblings, cousins, and nieces and nephews. They seem particularly inclined to cherish their fewer family members. Presumably, the acknowledgement, however implicit, of common roots and a shared heritage provides a sense of belonging that other ties (perhaps with the exception of lifelong friends) cannot easily provide. Siblings are unique because they are a link to a shared childhood (Bedford, 1995; Cicirelli, 1995; Connidis, 1989a; Voorpostel, Van der Lippe, Dykstra, & Flap, 2007). Nieces and nephews are special because they (as is the case for children and grandchildren) can provide a window on generations that succeed one's own. Interactions with younger family members can serve a "cohort-bridging function" (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005), giving a perspective on the changing social context of work, partnerships, and lifestyles.

Childlessness in late life should not be equated with social isolation, although several studies suggest that in times of need older adults without children are vulnerable to being without adequate sources of emotional and instrumental support (Chapman, 1989). Choi (1994) reports that childless people, compared with elderly parents living apart from children and elderly parents coresiding with children, are more likely to indicate they would have nobody who could take care of them if they became sick. In their study of the informal help provided to childless older adults who were recently released from the hospital, Johnson and Catalano (1981) show that although friends, neighbors, and distant kin can and do take on caregiving responsibilities, the care they provide tends to be less intense. Jerrome and Wenger (1999) have noted similar patterns more recently in the United Kingdom. Generally speaking, friends, neighbors, and distant kin are less likely to commit themselves to long-term involvement, and they are also more likely to help find formal care rather than provide care directly themselves. It is unclear whether the reluctance to make long-term commitments

reflects unwillingness to help or whether it reflects a fear of being seen as interfering.

## Childfree and Childless

In this article, we aim to find out whether people without children have organized their social lives differently from parents. We do so by comparing those who do and those who do not have living children in terms of (a) community activity; (b) contacts with relatives, friends, and neighbors; and (c) the configuration of support networks. Our starting point is that current patterns of social activity are connected with the kinds of lives older adults have led (Allan, 1989). They have evolved from patterns established earlier in life. To understand differences in the social embeddedness of childless older adults and older parents, it helps to think about ways in which having children or not having children may have created specific opportunities for or imposed specific restrictions on social interaction. Of course, the ways in which parenthood shapes social interactions are not limited to the past. Current circumstances may still be affected by the presence or absence of children.

A distinction that immediately comes to mind is that between being childfree and being childless. *Childfree* means having the freedom to enjoy the social and financial advantages of not having children. It means, for example, not having parenting (and grandparenting) commitments, allowing more space and time for friendship, socializing, and leisure-time pursuits. Those without children, the childfree, have not had the kinds of restrictions that those with families of their own have had. In our view, mothers—at least in the cohorts we are studying—would have had the fewest opportunities to develop and maintain ties outside the family circle and the immediate neighborhood because their lives revolved around homemaking and child-rearing responsibilities. Men's social engagements would not have been affected as strongly by parenthood. Following this reasoning, we would expect to see that people without children have more frequent and more intensive interactions outside the family and outside the local community than do parents. Moreover, we would expect to see that parents are more strongly involved with neighbors than are the childfree. The differences would be more pronounced among women than among men. Note that although the childless have freedom from parenting, this does not mean they are free from other family commitments (Allen, 1989; Wenger, 1998). Many women who never married stayed at home to care for ailing parents, kept house for a sibling, or have taken younger relatives into their own homes. Such family commitments would have limited their opportunities

for developing friendships and being active in clubs, hobby associations, and so forth and may have had financial implications.

Being childless means not having the social advantages that parents enjoy. One of them is being a member of a numerically dominant category in our society. Their opportunities are restricted because there is a relatively small pool of eligible contacts. Eligible contacts are those people who have the same rare or deviant characteristics. This argument assumes homogeneity in relationships, that is, a tendency to form close relationships with others who are similar in some designated aspect. Insofar as similarity in parental status constitutes the basis for associating with others, those without children would have faced and still do face greater barriers in their social interactions than parents, given their minority position. Given this line of thinking, we would expect to see that childless people have fewer and less supportive social contacts both within and outside the family.

Another social advantage that parents enjoy is that children provide links to others and promote contact with others. With children's social engagements at school, in clubs, and in the neighborhood comes an expansion of parents' networks. Children often function as go-betweens, introducing their parents into new social circles: parents of playmates and friends, teachers at school, members of clubs and associations, and so forth. As described earlier, parents often become better acquainted with their neighbors through their children as well. Following this reasoning, one would assume that those without children have smaller non-kin networks and have established fewer contacts in the neighborhood.

Being childless means to have a more restricted range of family ties. By virtue of not having children (and therefore no children-in-law and grandchildren), childless people have smaller families. The consequences, in terms of interaction with family members, are unclear, however. Earlier we suggested that those without children appear to cherish their fewer family members. This would be a reason for assuming relatively frequent and supportive interactions with family members among the childless. This idea is consistent with research suggesting that members of small families create special bonds with high levels of social connectedness (Dykstra & Knipscheer, 1995). An alternative argument suggests that there might be less contact with relatives among childless people compared with parents. Not only do they have a more limited range of family members, but their ties are also of a different nature: They have a collateral rather than a vertical emphasis (Johnson & Barer, 1995). Vertical ties tend to be dominant within families, meaning that patterns of interaction and reciprocity among family members are strongly structured along the lines of parents, children, and grandchildren.

Contacts outside these lines (e.g., between siblings, between cousins and their affines) tend to be less frequent and less supportive because they do not fit the modal family organization.

## Heterogeneity Among Childless People

A message echoed throughout this special volume is that childless older adults are not a homogeneous group. It matters, for example, whether they have never had children or have outlived them. It also matters whether they have remained childless within marriage or have never been married. Unfortunately, studies of the supports and social involvements of childless older adults have paid little attention to the variability within this group. To our knowledge, there are no studies in which older adults who have outlived their children are treated as a separate category, although several authors attest to the conceptual importance of distinguishing the two (e.g., Johnson & Barer, 1995). Usually the distinction is not even made at the time of data collection, and in studies where it is, small numbers tend to prohibit separate analyses (Johnson & Troll, 1992; Rempel, 1985). In a number of studies, no definition of childlessness is provided at all (e.g., Connidis & McMullin, 1994; Ikels, 1988; Larsson & Silverstein, 2004).

Previous research on the relationships of childless older adults has also been insufficiently sensitive to marital history differences. Some focused on childlessness regardless of marital status (Mugford & Kendig, 1986; Wenger, 1984) or have looked at specific childless groups only, such as the ever married (Bachrach, 1980; Keith, 1983), women (Longino & Lipman, 1982), or single women (Goldberg, Kantrow, Kremen, & Lauter, 1986; Rubinstein, Alexander, Goodman, & Luborsky, 1991). Others have compared and contrasted the married and the unmarried, glossing over marital history differences within the group of childless older adults (Chappell & Badger, 1989; Johnson & Troll, 1992; Lang, 2004; Lang & Carstensen, 1994). More recent studies have generally taken the diversity among never-married, divorced, widowed, and married childless older adults and older parents into account (Choi, 1994; Connidis & McMullin, 1994; Dykstra, 1995b; Johnson & Barer, 1995; Larsson & Silverstein, 2004).

In this article, we cannot remedy all the shortcomings of previous research. One limitation we have to accept is that we cannot look at those who never had children separately from those who have outlived their offspring. Only three of the surveys we are using (the German Berlin Aging Study, the Dutch Living Arrangements and Social Networks of Older Adults Survey, and the American National Survey of Families and

Households) can make this distinction. To maximize comparability across surveys, we are adopting the same definition for each; namely, childless people are those without any living children (see the article by Dykstra & Wagner, 2007, in this special issue, for analyses in which older adults who never had children are treated separately from those who no longer have any living children).

A shortcoming more easily remedied is the insensitivity to marital history. In the analyses in this article, older adults who remained childless in marriage are distinguished from those who are without children because they never married. The *married* also include those who are living in a consensual union (in most surveys, this is fewer than 5% of all those living with a partner). The *never married* also include those who have never lived with a partner of the same or of the opposite sex. The *formerly married* are either widowed, divorced, or no longer cohabiting (the widowed are the most numerous in this category). We are using marriage terminology for convenience sake.

Never-married women are more likely to have lived alone for a significant proportion of their adult lives and presumably have become accustomed to fending for themselves: securing their supports from outside the household. They "have had a lifetime to negotiate ties in unique ways" (Connidis & McMullin, 1994, p. 515). A significant proportion of never-married men have lived with their mothers or sisters for substantial parts of their lives, but this is not true for all never-married men (Wenger, 2001). Childless married couples are generally characterized by a high degree of interdependence (Wenger et al., 2000). The loss of the spouse might therefore be associated with greater isolation among those who are childless than among parents.

We present our findings separately for men and women. Traditional gender roles assume that parenthood is more central to women's identity than it is to men's (Veevers, 1973). For that reason, childlessness may be more consequential for women (particularly so for the ever married) than for men. Previous research on the social networks and supports of older adults has consistently shown gender differences among the never married. A non-negligible proportion of older childless never-married men can be characterized as "loners" (Wenger, 2001), preferring solitude or perhaps lacking the aptitude for lasting, close relationships. The smallest total networks have been identified among never-married men (Mugford & Kendig, 1986; van Tilburg, 1995; Wenger, 2001). Their situation stands in contrast to that of their female counterparts, who tend to have relatively expansive social networks. As is shown in the article by Koropeckjy-Cox and Call (2007), older never-married women are relatively well educated. They seem

to have the social skills that are required for engaging in mutually rewarding social interactions.

## Results

Now we proceed to present the outcomes of our cross-national comparative analyses. We begin by showing rates of community activity as indications of the extent to which childless older adults and older parents are embedded in the social circles offered by religious, political, social welfare, and recreational organizations.

### Community Activity

*Community activity* pertains to attendance at religious services, active membership in voluntary associations (e.g., choir, sports club, senior citizens' advocacy group, hobby association), and involvement in volunteer work (e.g., meals on wheels, unpaid services for sports clubs, leading Bible study groups at church). Table 1 shows the levels of community activity of childless older adults and older parents, distinguished by marital status.

*Attends religious services.* Religious involvement serves a socially integrating function in several ways (Dykstra, 1995a). A religious group provides a pool of social contacts with similar backgrounds, views on life, and values. In addition, the head of the congregation (minister, rabbi, priest, imam) may perform a supportive function as confidant, advisor, or teacher. The Australian, German, Japanese, Dutch, Spanish, Israeli, British, and American surveys asked about regular attendance at religious services. The definition of *regular attendance* varied between surveys and sometimes was left to the judgment of the respondent. As Table 1 shows, religious participation is highest among never-married childless women in Australia, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. No other consistent variations according to either parenthood or marital history emerge from the table. Gender differences are most important: Women are more likely than men to attend religious services regularly in all countries except Israel, where cultural differences dictate that men go to the synagogue more often than women do. Overall, levels of religious participation in the countries discussed here are highest in Spain and lowest in Germany.

*Active member voluntary association.* Voluntary associations provide contexts for socializing and enjoying the company of others. Information on the active membership of clubs and voluntary associations was available in the

**Table 1**
**Community Activity of Older Adults in Nine Countries, Categorized by Gender and by Parental and Marital Status (percentage yes)**

| | Childless Men | | | Fathers | | Childless Women | | | Mothers | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Never Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Never Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married |
| Australia (ALSA) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Attends religious service | 25 | — | 30 | 27 | 30 | 56 | 41 | 33 | 45 | 37 |
| Active member voluntary association | 16 | — | 2 | 16 | 17 | 17 | 18 | 15 | 15 | 17 |
| *n* | 36 | 22 | 47 | 254 | 690 | 39 | 37 | 40 | 318 | 580 |
| Finland (SFLC) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Active member voluntary association | 8 | 10 | 4 | 25 | 19 | 22 | 24 | 21 | 22 | 22 |
| Does volunteer work | 5 | 37 | 10 | 5 | 12 | 20 | 11 | 27 | 14 | 18 |
| *n* | 41 | 19 | 41 | 104 | 413 | 92 | 54 | 28 | 484 | 274 |
| | Childless Men | | | | | Childless Women | | | | |
| Germany (BASE) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Attends religious services | | 6 | | 4 | 7 | | 11 | | 7 | 0 |
| Does volunteer work | | 8 | | 7 | 20 | | 8 | | 10 | 18 |
| *n* | | 64 | | 72 | 111 | | 92 | | 136 | 22 |
| Japan (NSFI) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Active member voluntary organization | | 30 | | 36 | 45 | | 35 | | 31 | 34 |
| Does volunteer work | | 13 | | 14 | 20 | | 11 | | 9 | 12 |
| *n* | | 30 | | 104 | 565 | | 52 | | 510 | 538 |

| | Never Married | Ever Married | Ever Married | Never Married | Ever Married | Ever Married |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Israel (ICBS 60+) | | | | | | |
| Attends religious services | 42 | 39 | 50 | 13 | 14 | 19 |
| Active member voluntary association | 12 | 16 | 17 | 7 | 19 | 18 |
| *n* | 68 | 115 | 1,789 | 199 | 92 | 1,918 |

| | Childless Men | | | Fathers | | Childless Women | | | Mothers | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Never Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Never Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married |
| Netherlands (NESTOR-LSN) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Attends religious services | 40 | 27 | 45 | 42 | 48 | 65 | 42 | 64 | 54 | 56 |
| Active member voluntary association | 54 | 54 | 59 | 60 | 71 | 68 | 58 | 68 | 65 | 63 |
| Does volunteer work | 12 | 14 | 36 | 17 | 34 | 34 | 9 | 13 | 18 | 24 |
| *n* | 83 | 30 | 122 | 283 | 1,368 | 113 | 104 | 86 | 762 | 878 |
| Spain (CIS-INSERSO) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Attends religious services | 77 | — | 80 | 66 | 72 | 90 | 88 | 94 | 78 | 85 |
| Active member voluntary association | 27 | — | 32 | 45 | 40 | 18 | 23 | 26 | 19 | 22 |
| *n* | 38 | 12 | 70 | 162 | 743 | 96 | 53 | 39 | 672 | 573 |
| United Kingdom (ALPHA) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Attends religious services | 29 | 32 | 32 | 26 | 31 | 54 | 43 | 46 | 43 | 45 |
| Active member voluntary association | 35 | 35 | 41 | 41 | 41 | 39 | 40 | 38 | 40 | 37 |
| *n* | 179 | 110 | 126 | 723 | 1,136 | 279 | 230 | 61 | 1,298 | 525 |
| United States (NSFH) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Attends religious services | 27 | 46 | 46 | 37 | 51 | 62 | 56 | 56 | 52 | 53 |
| *n* | 32 | 48 | 30 | 163 | 434 | 58 | 154 | 39 | 752 | 329 |

Note: The name (and acronym) of each country's study is listed in Note 1.

Australian, Finnish, Japanese, Dutch, Spanish, Israeli, British, and American surveys. To be active members, people must attend meetings of the organization. We focus on active membership rather than membership per se because we feel it is a better indicator of involvement in the community. Few differences between groups can be seen for active participation in clubs and voluntary associations. Only Japan and the Netherlands show group differences and, more particularly, a relatively high participation level for married fathers. Involvement in clubs and voluntary associations is more common in the Netherlands than in any other country in the comparison. The relatively high Dutch participation levels are possibly linked with the way in which sports activities are organized: Many sports require club memberships.

*Does volunteer work.* Volunteer work has benefits not only for the community at large but also for volunteers themselves. Volunteer work is a way of contributing to the well-being of others. The experience of being useful tends to make people feel good. In Finland, Germany, Japan, and the Netherlands, the surveys asked about volunteer work. The definitions of volunteer work included helping activities that are performed outside formal organizations (e.g., in the neighborhood). As Table 1 shows, there are no consistent group differences across the four countries. In both Germany and Japan, married fathers are most likely to be active in volunteer work. In the Netherlands, married men regardless of parenthood and never-married childless women have the highest levels of participation in volunteer work.

In summary, very few differences between childless older adults and older parents are found in the data on community activity. Those without children are as likely as parents to be active members of voluntary associations. Moreover, they are equally likely to be involved in volunteer work. It is only for religious involvement that a reasonably consistent pattern emerges (the Israeli data form an exception). Of all groups, never-married childless women have the highest rates of attendance at religious services. Noting that the church has social functions other than religious services (volunteer work is often conducted in and via the church, one becomes a member of the church choir, etc.), it becomes clear that for these cohorts of never-married childless women, the church is an important avenue of social participation. Their religious involvements provide access to circles outside the family and the immediate neighborhood.

## Contact With Relatives, Friends, and Neighbors

In this section, we focus on the involvement in personal relationships of childless older adults and older parents. More particularly, we look at

levels of contact in three types of personal relationships: relatives, friends, and neighbors. All involve interactions (e.g., chatting, visiting, going places together) with people outside the respondent's household. The frequency of interaction is often used as an indicator of social integration (Chappell & Badger, 1989). It says something about how socially embedded people are in informal networks. Table 2 shows, for older men and women in different marital and parental status categories, the proportions of those who have at least weekly contact with relatives, friends, and neighbors, respectively. The data are from Australia (no data on neighbors), Finland, Israel, Japan, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

*Relatives.* Some of the surveys asked about the frequency of contact with relatives more generally, whereas others asked separate questions about the frequency of interactions with different types of family members (children, siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews, etc.). In the latter case, we pooled the responses across the set of questions to obtain a comparable measure.

As Table 2 shows, in all countries, more parents have at least weekly contact with relatives than do those without children. Clearly, then, parenthood organizes contacts within families. Those with children seem to have or find more occasions to communicate with family members and to spend time with them. It would appear that much of the contact with relatives among parents involves contact with their adult children and their families, attesting to the dominance of vertical ties.

As long as they are married, mothers and fathers are equally likely to have high levels of contact with relatives. The loss of the spouse appears to be more consequential for fathers' family ties than for mothers' (except in Spain): A smaller percentage of formerly married fathers than of formerly married mothers interacts weekly or more often with relatives. Here we seem to have evidence of what has been referred to as women's "kin-keeping" function within marriage (Rosenthal, 1985; Wellman, 1985): Wives maintain and negotiate the couple's ties with the family. Following the loss of the partner, fathers have fewer family interactions, presumably because they no longer have wives who keep up with all the family events and organize family gatherings.

Among the childless, consistent marital status differences in levels of family contact do not emerge. In the Australian and Finnish data, married childless men and women are least likely to have weekly contact with relatives, whereas in Japan married men without children and in the United Kingdom married women without children are most likely to have weekly contact with relatives. In Australia, Finland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, never-married men have relatively high levels of contact

**Table 2**
**At Least Weekly Contact With Relatives, Friends, and Neighbors for Older Adults in Eight Countries, Categorized by Gender and by Parental and Marital Status (percentage yes)**

| | Childless Men | | | Fathers | | Childless Women | | | Mothers | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Never Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Never Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married |
| Australia (ALSA) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Relatives | 39 | 32 | 26 | 68 | 79 | 40 | 53 | 23 | 82 | 79 |
| Friends | 33 | 59 | 21 | 40 | 29 | 35 | 59 | 30 | 42 | 31 |
| *n* | 36 | 22 | 47 | 256 | 695 | 40 | 38 | 40 | 327 | 585 |
| Finland (SFLC) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Relatives | 49 | 28 | 20 | 69 | 78 | 42 | 25 | 21 | 82 | 78 |
| Friends | 58 | 77 | 63 | 64 | 53 | 68 | 73 | 71 | 64 | 59 |
| Neighbors | 57 | 63 | 56 | 56 | 50 | 49 | 62 | 61 | 57 | 48 |
| *n* | 41 | 19 | 41 | 103 | 410 | 92) | 54 | 28 | 480 | 274 |
| | Childless Men | | | | | Childless Women | | | | |
| Japan (NSFI) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Relatives | | 60 | | 77 | 94 | | 67 | | 92 | 96 |
| Friends | | 80 | | 68 | 71 | | 71 | | 70 | 74 |
| Neighbors | | 60 | | 59 | 65 | | 74 | | 81 | 84 |
| *n* | | 27 | | 47 | 433 | | 49 | | 303 | 277 |
| | Never Married | Ever Married | | Ever Married | | Never Married | Ever Married | | Ever Married | |
| Israel (ICBS 60+) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Relatives | 23 | 62 | | 87 | | 32 | 50 | | 84 | |
| Friends | 42 | 40 | | 43 | | 39 | 43 | | 38 | |
| Neighbors | 27 | 37 | | 41 | | 45 | 47 | | 42 | |
| *n* | 68 | 115 | | 1,789 | | 199 | 92 | | 1,918 | |

| | Childless Men | | | | | Childless Women | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Never Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Never Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married |
| Netherlands (NESTOR-LSN) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Relatives | 73 | 47 | 73 | 89 | 94 | 72 | 66 | 74 | 96 | 95 |
| Friends | 39 | 43 | 38 | 36 | 39 | 66 | 46 | 44 | 46 | 40 |
| Neighbors | 54 | 56 | 66 | 50 | 46 | 55 | 53 | 62 | 55 | 50 |
| *n* | 79 | 29 | 119 | 282 | 1,365 | 102 | 100 | 85 | 765 | 877 |
| Spain (CIS-INSERSO)[a] | | | | | | | | | | |
| Relatives | 0 | — | 2 | 34 | 33 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 32 | 29 |
| Friends | 74 | — | 73 | 69 | 71 | 62 | 65 | 71 | 52 | 58 |
| Neighbors | 86 | — | 82 | 74 | 85 | 70 | 80 | 88 | 75 | 83 |
| *n* | 38 | 12 | 70 | 162 | 743 | 96 | 53 | 39 | 672 | 578 |
| United Kingdom (ALPHA) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Relatives | 63 | 41 | 42 | 80 | 87 | 60 | 58 | 73 | 91 | 90 |
| Friends | 74 | 80 | 75 | 79 | 76 | 80 | 81 | 83 | 78 | 76 |
| Neighbors | 75 | 79 | 86 | 83 | 85 | 81 | 84 | 87 | 82 | 85 |
| *n* | 179 | 110 | 126 | 723 | 1,136 | 279 | 230 | 61 | 1,298 | 525 |
| United States (NSFH) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Relatives | 44 | 17 | 32 | 53 | 57 | 38 | 19 | 23 | 64 | 62 |
| *n* | 32 | 48 | 30 | 163 | 434 | 58 | 154 | 39 | 752 | 329 |

Note: The name (and acronym) of each country's study is listed in Note 1.
a. For Spain, the figures represent those with "quite frequent contact" or more.

with relatives. This is also the case for Finnish and Japanese never-married childless women. Considering what we know from earlier research about the family ties of the never married, these contacts are most likely to involve interactions with siblings.

A consistent gender difference is visible among the formerly married without children. In all countries (except for Finland, Israel, and Spain, which lack appropriate data), formerly married childless men have lower levels of contact with relatives than do their female counterparts. It is not entirely clear how to account for this finding. Is it the absence of a wife kin-keeper? Are formerly married childless men less kin oriented? The formerly married childless men are a relatively old group. Do they have lower levels of contact with relatives because they have fewer surviving relatives?

*Friends.* Diary studies inform us that many family interactions are quite mundane, involving home maintenance, bills, repairs, or yard work (Larson, Mannell, & Zuzanek, 1986). Interactions with friends tend to be quite different. They are more often characterized by fun and the pleasure of being in each other's company (Dykstra, 1990). Relationships with friends differ in more ways from relationships with relatives. Relationships with friends are not considered inalienable in the way family relationships are (Jerrome & Wenger, 1999). They require efforts to be kept alive and are more susceptible to dissolution if they are not serviced (Dykstra, 1990; Jerrome & Wenger, 1999). Relationships with friends tend to be more voluntary than those with family members, implying that there are fewer pressures toward interaction that are external to the relationships.

Our findings support the hypothesis that men's and women's friendships are differentially affected by parenthood. Among men, the frequency of contact with friends is not consistently related to whether they have living children, but it is among women. We describe the findings for men first. In Australia, it is formerly married men, whether or not they have children, who have the most contact with friends. In Japan, childless men are most likely to have weekly contact with friends. In Finland, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Spain, and Israel, the proportions who interact with friends on a weekly basis or more often do not differ by either parental or marital status. Turning to the findings for women, we see indications in Finland, Spain, and the United Kingdom that childless women, regardless of marital status, are more likely to be in weekly contact with friends than mothers are. We see relatively high levels of friendship interaction for formerly married childless women in Australia, for never-married childless women in the Netherlands, and for currently married childless women in Japan. Overall,

the levels of contact with friends are highest in the English sample and lowest in the Dutch sample.

*Neighbors.* Congenial exchanges with neighbors can help promote a sense of security and belonging. They can help make the place where one lives feel like home, a place where one can relax and regain energy. Do the neighborly contacts of childless older adults differ from those of parents? The answer to this question can be described quite briefly (no data were available from Australia). Overall, there is little variation by parental and marital status. There is only one consistent finding across the different countries: Of all groups, married childless women are most likely to have at least weekly contacts with neighbors. This is contrary to what we had expected to find, that mothers, and parents more generally, would show the highest levels of neighborhood involvement. We had assumed that mothers would have had the most home-centered lifestyle and that their current neighborly involvements would be a continuation of earlier patterns. Given the role that children often play of promoting contacts in the neighborhood, we had also expected, again assuming that current social patterns reflect earlier ones, that parents would generally have relatively high rates of neighborhood interaction. Of course, these arguments presume long-term residency in neighborhoods and little residential turnover. The married childless women may have been the least geographically mobile or may be most likely to live in residentially stable neighborhoods, but we do not have the data to substantiate either argument. There tends to be an inverse relationship between residential mobility in a neighborhood and the level of contacts that older adults have with their neighbors (Thomése, 1998; Wenger & St. Leger, 1992). Overall, neighborly contacts are highest in Spain and the United Kingdom and lowest in Finland and the Netherlands.

In summary, the findings show that the structuring influence of childlessness varies for the three types of relationships. Within families, childless people seem to occupy a side-row rather than a center position. They are considerably less likely to have frequent interactions with relatives than are older parents. Parenthood organizes social contacts within families and increases the numbers of relatives available for interaction. As regards friends, the findings show differences by gender. Childlessness seems to be inconsequential to men's friendships. The levels of friendship involvement of childless men are similar to those of fathers. Among women, however, childlessness seems to bring better opportunities for sustaining friendships. Childless women are more likely to see friends frequently than are mothers, and over the years they have more time to devote to friendships. Finally, neighborly contacts show little variation by either parental or marital status,

with one exception. Childless married women generally have the highest levels of neighborly contacts, but the differences with the other groups are marginal. It appears that whether or not one has children, and whether or not one is married, is hardly relevant to one's social involvements with neighbors.

## Support Networks

So far, we have considered the involvement of childless older adults and older parents in a variety of social groups, all of which serve a socially integrating function: They provide links between individuals and groups of individuals in society. However, we have been looking at these groups in isolation from one another. In what follows, we go beyond examining the involvement in separate groups. In our view, one gains a better understanding of how well embedded childless older adults are by looking at configurations of relationships, that is, at the diversity of ties, their number, and their supportiveness. At this point, we also return to the issue of the purported social vulnerability of childless older adults. It has been suggested (see, e.g., Chapman's [1989] review chapter; Choi, 1994; Koropeckyj-Cox, 1998) that in times of need, childless older adults are more likely to run into support deficits. For that reason, we examine the support networks of childless older adults and older parents. The question we address is whether the networks of childless older adults have poorer support potential than those of older parents.

## Wenger Typology

Support networks form the core of social networks, including all those members who provide emotional support, companionship, advice, advocacy, instrumental help, or personal care (Wenger, 1991). Smaller than total networks, they average 5 to 7, with a range from approximately 2 to 22 (Dykstra, 1990; Mugford & Kendig, 1986; van Tilburg, 1990). The network typology developed by Wenger (1989)—which is used in subsequent analyses in this article—was developed from an intensive qualitative interview and observational study of older people living in the community and later operationalized for use with large samples and as a tool for practitioners. The identified support network types differ on the basis of the availability of local close kin; the frequency of contact with family, friends, and neighbors; and the levels of social integration in community groups (see Wenger, 1991, for a detailed description of this typology). The five types identified are as follows:

- *The local family dependent support network* in which the older person relies primarily on the presence of local kin for help and assistance;
- *The locally integrated support network* in which the older person is involved with local family, friends, and neighbors and is active in local community groups;
- *The local self-contained support network* in which the older person maintains a home-centered lifestyle, relying mainly on neighbors for help and assistance if necessary;
- *The wider community focused support network* in which the older person is in touch with distant kin but is primarily involved with friends and local voluntary groups; and
- *The private restricted support network,* which is associated with little potential local support, although the older person is likely to be married.

The first three types are associated with longer term residence and the presence of local kin. The last two network types are associated with the absence of local kin (apart from the spouse).

The local family dependent and the locally integrated support network types have been demonstrated to provide higher levels of instrumental support than other network types and to make it possible for older people to remain in the community at higher levels of impairment (Wenger, 1992, 1993). The higher instrumental support levels are associated with two characteristics. The first is the presence of close family members in these networks. They are the ones who can best cope with tasks requiring long-term commitment (Litwak, 1985), and of all relationship types (with the exception of spouses), they provide the highest levels of practical and material assistance (Wenger, 1984, 1992). The second characteristic is the availability of network members living nearby. Although geographic proximity is not a prerequisite for the provision of support, it does facilitate it. The locally integrated support network is the most robust in terms of support, which is attributable to the diversity of the sources.

The locally integrated and wider community focused network types have been shown to be associated with higher morale and lower levels of loneliness and social isolation (Wenger & Shahtahmasebi, 1990). The local self-contained and private restricted support network types are less robust and are associated with higher levels of loneliness and social isolation. The lack of support sources other than neighbors accounts for the limited support potential of these two network types. Although neighbors may step in in emergency situations, they generally do not provide more sustained forms of support (Kendig, 1986; Peters & Kaiser, 1985; Wenger, 1990). The private restricted is the most vulnerable network type (Wenger & Shahtahmasebi, 1990).

In a wide range of applications of the Wenger typology in European and non-European countries, it has been shown that the modal support network type is the locally integrated network followed by the local family dependent network (Wenger, 1996). In all samples, more than 50% of respondents have been identified as having one or the other of these two network types. Findings from the Netherlands (Thissen, Wenger, & Scharf, 1995) and Germany (Scharf, 1995) indicate that there are cross-national differences in the distribution of support network types in the population. In these two countries, the local self-contained network type, representing a privatized home-centered lifestyle, which is a minority network in the United Kingdom, is more common.

For this article, colleagues from Australia, Finland, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States reanalyzed their network data using as close an approximation to the Wenger typology as possible. Note that they did not use the Wenger typology while collecting their data. Findings from Israel, based on a typology developed by Litwin (1997, 1999), are also included. Litwin distinguishes six types of support networks. Litwin's narrow family-focused, religious family-focused, and traditional extended family types approximate the Wenger local family dependent support network. His diversified type clearly mirrors the locally integrated network, whereas his friend and neighbor and attenuated types are similar to the wider community focused and the private restricted support networks, respectively. To include in this article at least one country that is not Western European, we include data based on the Litwin typology for comparison.

## Support Network Types, Country by Country

As can be seen in Table 3, there are differences across countries in the prevalence of the various network types. For that reason, we start by describing the findings for each country separately. The question guiding our country-by-country analyses is whether it is marriage or parenthood that influences support network type most strongly.

The support network patterns in Australia contrast with those in the other countries. In Australia, the wider community focused network is much more prevalent than elsewhere. It is the modal network type for parents (about 50% of mothers and fathers have a network of this type), and it is much more common among the childless in Australia than in any of the other countries discussed. The defining characteristics of this network type

## Table 3
## Distribution of Network Types for Older Adults in Seven Countries (percentage yes), Categorized by Gender and by Parental and Marital Status (Wenger typology)

| | Childless Men | | | Fathers | | Childless Women | | | Mothers | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Never Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Never Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married |
| Australia (ALSA) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Local family dependent | 0 | 22 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 7 | 9 | 2 | 0 |
| Locally integrated | 18 | 33 | 31 | 16 | 14 | 5 | 40 | 41 | 17 | 11 |
| Local self-contained | 59 | 11 | 34 | 24 | 27 | 45 | 23 | 6 | 23 | 28 |
| Wider community focused | 18 | 33 | 22 | 51 | 45 | 30 | 27 | 36 | 56 | 50 |
| Private restricted | 6 | 0 | 9 | 8 | 14 | 20 | 3 | 6 | 2 | 11 |
| *n* | 17 | 18 | 32 | 237 | 640 | 20 | 30 | 33 | 302 | 548 |
| Finland (SFLC) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Local family dependent | 41 | 8 | 0 | 29 | 37 | 21 | 0 | 0 | 29 | 33 |
| Locally integrated | 2 | 11 | 10 | 40 | 31 | 19 | 20 | 13 | 37 | 35 |
| Local self-contained | 31 | 35 | 28 | 12 | 20 | 18 | 29 | 30 | 20 | 18 |
| Wider community focused | 5 | 23 | 1 | 13 | 8 | 5 | 12 | 17 | 8 | 10 |
| Private restricted | 21 | 23 | 61 | 7 | 4 | 37 | 40 | 40 | 6 | 4 |
| *n* | 38 | 19 | 36 | 97 | 392 | 80 | 50 | 26 | 467 | 266 |

| | Never Married | Ever Married | Ever Married | Never Married | Ever Married | Ever Married |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Israel (ICBS 60+) | | | | | | |
| Family focused | 12 | 30 | 39 | 15 | 30 | 36 |
| Diversified | 21 | 36 | 31 | 22 | 34 | 24 |
| Friend and neighbor | 34 | 16 | 17 | 28 | 17 | 19 |
| Attenuated | 34 | 17 | 14 | 36 | 19 | 22 |
| *n* | 68 | 115 | 1,789 | 199 | 92 | 1,918 |

*(continued)*

## Table 3 (continued)

| | Childless Men | | | Fathers | | Childless Women | | | Mothers | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Never Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Never Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married | Formerly Married | Currently Married |
| Netherlands (NESTOR-LSN) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Local family dependent | 29 | 14 | 12 | 38 | 48 | 15 | 12 | 15 | 37 | 46 |
| Locally integrated | 16 | 14 | 10 | 25 | 31 | 24 | 10 | 22 | 40 | 33 |
| Local self-contained | 28 | 38 | 36 | 21 | 12 | 27 | 30 | 32 | 13 | 12 |
| Wider community focused | 7 | 0 | 6 | 7 | 2 | 10 | 8 | 12 | 4 | 4 |
| Private restricted | 24 | 34 | 36 | 9 | 7 | 24 | 40 | 19 | 7 | 5 |
| *n* | 78 | 29 | 107 | 260 | 1,301 | 100 | 98 | 78 | 713 | 851 |
| Spain (CIS-INSERSO)[a] | | | | | | | | | | |
| Local family dependent | 10 | — | 45 | 17 | 23 | 5 | 4 | 16 | 9 | 19 |
| Locally integrated | 21 | — | 35 | 44 | 53 | 39 | 18 | 62 | 49 | 59 |
| Local self-contained | 0 | — | 2 | 8 | 7 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 5 |
| Wider community focused | 8 | — | 0 | 18 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 0 | 29 | 14 |
| Private restricted | 61 | — | 18 | 13 | 5 | 42 | 65 | 22 | 10 | 3 |
| *n* | 38 | 12 | 70 | 162 | 743 | 96 | 53 | 39 | 672 | 573 |
| United Kingdom (ALPHA) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Local family dependent | 25 | 7 | 10 | 25 | 29 | 17 | 10 | 16 | 31 | 27 |
| Locally integrated | 26 | 22 | 19 | 48 | 46 | 26 | 30 | 44 | 51 | 54 |
| Local self-contained | 17 | 30 | 17 | 11 | 11 | 18 | 21 | 20 | 8 | 9 |
| Wider community focused | 4 | 5 | 11 | 6 | 6 | 15 | 11 | 3 | 5 | 6 |
| Private restricted | 28 | 37 | 43 | 11 | 7 | 24 | 28 | 18 | 5 | 5 |
| *n* | 170 | 102 | 116 | 696 | 1,103 | 282 | 216 | 58 | 1,263 | 511 |
| United States (NSFH) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Local family dependent | 32 | 10 | 11 | 34 | 36 | 25 | 11 | 5 | 32 | 33 |
| Locally integrated | 12 | 6 | 22 | 20 | 27 | 18 | 10 | 22 | 33 | 33 |
| Local self-contained | 16 | 22 | 32 | 16 | 17 | 6 | 21 | 18 | 11 | 18 |
| Wider community focused | 4 | 7 | 5 | 10 | 8 | 14 | 20 | 15 | 11 | 8 |
| Private restricted | 36 | 55 | 30 | 20 | 12 | 37 | 38 | 40 | 13 | 8 |
| (*n*) | 29 | 43 | 28 | 150 | 399 | 55 | 121 | 31 | 693 | 310 |

Note: The name (and acronym) of each country's study is listed in Note 1.
a. In Spain, 5% identified as inconclusive were omitted.

are an absence of kin within 50 miles and a focus on friendship. Australia is a large country, with a low population density and a large immigrant population. It is also a geographically mobile society. All these characteristics may contribute to lifestyles focusing on friendship and long-distance family ties, but they also apply to the United States, and different network patterns are found there.

The modal network pattern for Australian men and women who never married is the local self-contained support network, representing a privatized, home-centered lifestyle. Almost two thirds of the never-married men and almost half of the never-married women have this type of support network. The most prevalent network types among formerly married childless men and women are the locally integrated and the wider community focused. Both network types have higher levels of interaction with non-kin. Two thirds of the formerly married without children have networks of these types. The local self-contained support network is the modal type for currently married childless men (one third have a network of this type), whereas for currently married childless women it is the locally integrated support network (two fifths have a network of this type). In Australia, both marriage and parenthood seem to contribute to differences in the availability of support.

In Finland, the local self-contained support network is more common than in either the United Kingdom, Spain, or the United States. Among childless men, the modal network type of those who never married is local family dependent (two fifths have this type of network); for formerly married men, it is local self-contained (one third have this type of network); but for childless married men, it is private restricted (three fifths have this type of network, suggesting heavy dependence on wives). For formerly married fathers, the mode is the robust locally integrated network (two fifths have this type of network) and for married fathers, the local family dependent network (almost two fifths have this type of network). For Finnish men, therefore, it seems that both marriage and parenthood contribute to differences in the availability of support.

The picture for childless women in Finland is different from that for childless men. For all marital categories of childless women, the modal network type is the most vulnerable private restricted (about two fifths of the never married, formerly married, and currently married have networks of this type). Mothers, whether still married or not, are most likely to have robust locally integrated support networks (more than one third have networks of this type), although the local family dependent network is almost equally important for those who are married. For Finnish women, therefore, it seems to be motherhood that makes the difference.

As described earlier, support network data from Israel are based on Litwin's (1996) network typology. We only have data comparing those who married and those who did not. Levels of childlessness are lower in Israel; thus, despite a large sample, differentiating between the childless people in terms of present marital status would have resulted in very small numbers for some groups (e.g., formerly married childless men). For the present analyses, Litwin's narrow family-focused, religious family-focused, and traditional extended family types were subsumed under a single family-focused type.

The findings for Israeli men and women are quite similar. The modal support network types for parents are family focused (comparable with Wenger's [1996] local family dependent support network), followed by diversified (comparable with Wenger's locally integrated support network). The modal type for those who never married is the attenuated network (comparable with Wenger's private restricted support network), followed by the friend and neighbor network (comparable with Wenger's wider community focused support network). Those who married but had no children are more similar to parents. However, their modal network type is diversified followed by family focused.

In Israel, the greater influence on support network type appears to be marriage. The finding that parents and those who married but have no children are located in family-based networks possibly reflects the familism of Jewish culture, but as Litwin (personal communication, n.d.) points out, this is not the full story. Because Israel is such a small country, family members are not separated by large distances. Short traveling distances promote the familial nature that underlies social relations. Litwin also draws attention to cohort effects: Many of the European-born elderly were victims of the Holocaust. It is not unlikely that familial ties gained a unique importance in cases where many family members were killed. Strong sibling bonds were formed among those who helped each other survive. Finally, subsequent Israeli war-related losses further bind families in grief. All of these factors stand behind the family focus of the elderly Jewish cohort in Israel.

In the Netherlands, the local self-contained support network is again more common. Here, too, more childless people than parents have private restricted networks. The modal network types for Dutch parents are family dependent or locally integrated (more than 75% of the parents have these types of support networks). The local self-contained network is modal overall for Dutch older adults without children, but there are differences related to gender and marital status.

We find a bimodal distribution of network type for never-married childless men between local family dependent and local self-contained network types

(almost one third each). A comparable number of childless never married also have local self-contained networks. More women than men in this category have the optimum locally integrated support networks (nearly a quarter). Among the formerly married childless men and women, a relatively high proportion have private restricted networks (more than one third of the men and two fifths of the women in this category). A higher percentage of married childless men have private restricted support networks than do married childless women (more than one third of men in this category and almost one fifth of women). Locally integrated support networks are modal for both married childless women and their male counterparts. For both formerly and currently married men and women, the modal support network type is locally integrated. In the Netherlands, parenthood appears to be the more important factor in determining support network type.

The pattern in Spain, on the other hand, suggests that being married is the more crucial factor for both men and women without children. Three fifths of never-married men and almost half of the formerly married have the most vulnerable network type, that is, the private restricted. Childless married men, however, are most likely to have local family dependent support networks, followed by locally integrated support networks (80% of childless married men have networks of these types), and these are the two types of networks that provide the highest levels of instrumental help. A similar pattern is found among childless Spanish women. Two fifths of the never married and two thirds of the formerly married have private restricted networks. However, two thirds of childless married women have the highly supportive locally integrated networks.

For Spanish fathers, the locally integrated network is modal: More than half of currently married fathers and more than two fifths of formerly married fathers have this type of network. The networks of Spanish mothers show a similar pattern: More than two thirds of currently married mothers and almost half of formerly married mothers have locally integrated support networks. Among both men and women with children, we see that the currently married are more likely to have networks with high support potential than are the formerly married. Among Spanish parents, it appears that currently being married is what contributes to higher levels of support.

For the United States, the findings show clear differences by parental status. Whereas the modal network type for childless men and women is the private restricted (approximately two fifths of the childless have this type of network), it is either the local family dependent or the locally integrated type for parents (approximately three fifths of parents have either of these types of networks). In other words, childless older Americans are most likely to

have the most vulnerable network type, whereas older American parents are most likely to have networks with the highest support potential, suggesting that among the countries for which we have data, childlessness may have the greatest impact in the United States.

Apart from this general pattern, the data show differentiation within each group. Of the American childless, the never married are most likely to have local family dependent networks (almost one third of never-married men and one fourth of never-married women have this type of network). Formerly and currently married childless women are more likely to have wider community focused networks and less likely to have local self-contained networks than are their male counterparts. Thus, a relatively high proportion of ever-married childless women rely on ties outside the immediate family and the community in which they live for support, whereas a relatively high proportion of ever-married childless men rely on their spouses and neighbors for support. Of all the childless groups in the United States, formerly married childless men are most likely to have private restricted networks, indicating the highest risk of social isolation. In the United States, parenthood is what seems to most strongly influence network type.

In the country-by-country description of the findings, the question guiding our analyses was Is it marriage or parenthood that influences support network type most strongly? The important influence on network type is as follows:

- Australia: parenthood and marriage
- Finland: marriage and fatherhood for men, motherhood for women
- Israel: marriage
- Netherlands: parenthood
- Spain: being currently married, particularly for women
- United Kingdom: parenthood, particularly for men
- United States: parenthood

## Support Network Types, Cross-Country Comparisons

Notwithstanding cross-country differences in the distributions of support network types, our findings show consistent differences between childless older adults and older parents. As can be seen in Table 3, in all countries with the exception of Australia, those without children are more likely to have networks with limited support potential. That is, they are more likely than parents to have private restricted networks or local self-contained networks. Parents, however, are more likely to have networks with high support potential, that is, local family dependent and locally integrated support network types. With these observations, we have provided a general sketch of

the support network differences between older parents and childless older adults. Across countries, there are rather consistent variations in this general pattern by marital status, and among the childless in particular, there are also rather consistent variations by gender. One should note that the findings for the childless show greater variation in support network types than do those for parents.

For example, among the childless, with the exception of Australia, the situation of the never married stands out. A relatively high proportion of never-married childless men have local family dependent support networks, a finding that reflects their high likelihood of sharing a household with a sibling (Kendig, 1986; Solinge, 1994; Wenger, 2001). A relatively high proportion of never-married childless women (again with the exception of Australia) have locally integrated or wider community focused support networks. High levels of non-kin interaction are characteristic of both types of support networks. Studies have repeatedly shown that never-married women, compared to their male counterparts, are quite active socially and have relatively many supportive friendships (Cwikel, Gramotnev, & Lee, 2006; Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Mugford & Kendig, 1986; van Tilburg, 1995; Wenger, 2001). This social resourcefulness is generally attributed to their relatively higher levels of educational attainment. Having the appropriate skills makes people less dependent on spontaneous encounters or on ritualized family gatherings.

Of all the childless groups, the formerly married are most likely to have private restricted networks, and there are no consistent gender differences. In Finland, the Netherlands, and Spain, the percentages with private restricted networks are higher among formerly married childless women than among their male counterparts, whereas in the United Kingdom and the United States, the pattern is the reverse. In Australia, few childless older adults have private restricted networks (with the exception of never-married women), and in the Israeli data set, the formerly and currently married are treated as a single group.

Furthermore, currently married childless men are more likely than currently married childless women to have local self-contained networks (except in Finland and the United Kingdom), showing a high reliance on wives for social contact, help, and support. Finally, in all countries except the United States, currently married childless women are more likely than currently married childless men to have locally integrated networks. This finding should come as no surprise, given that earlier in this article (see Table 2) we showed that currently married childless women have the highest levels of neighborly contact.

Although the majority of those with living children are socially well embedded, our findings show that parenthood is no guarantee against social isolation. Overall, just fewer than 10% of parents have the vulnerable private restricted support networks. The proportion with this type of network is higher among formerly married parents than it is among currently married parents. Moreover, among fathers the difference in the proportion with private restricted support networks between those who are currently married and those who are formerly married is greater than it is among mothers. In a similar vein, in all countries but Australia (and the distinction cannot be made with the Israeli data), formerly married fathers are less likely than currently married fathers to have the highly supportive local family dependent or locally integrated networks. Among mothers, the difference in the proportions with the most supportive networks between formerly married and currently married mothers is virtually negligible, with the exception of Spain, where the pattern is similar to that for fathers. These findings corroborate those of other studies that have suggested that having a spouse is a greater social resource for men than for women (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; de Jong Gierveld, 1986).

In comparing the support networks of childless older adults and older parents, our aim was to answer the question of whether those without children are more likely to encounter support deficits in times of need. Our findings show that childless older adults are indeed less likely than older parents to have robust networks (Fiori, Antonucci, & Cortina, 2006; Gibson & Mugford, 1986). Relatively many in this group have only one major support provider, who is often a member of the household—a spouse or a coresident sibling with no or a restricted number of backups. Moreover, the backups tend to be the kinds of associates who are ill equipped to provide intensive amounts of support over extended periods of time (Litwak, 1985). It is clear that more of those who have no children have those types of support networks that are less likely to provide consistent support in the face of dependency (Wenger, 1997a, 1997c). The more substantive answer to the question of whether the childless are more likely to encounter support deficits in times of need is Yes, but it does not apply equally to all of the childless. Childless men, regardless of marital status, are more likely than childless women to have vulnerable networks. Moreover, the formerly married without children run greater risks of encountering support deficits than do the never married and the currently married. The marital status differences are greater among childless men than among childless women. Nevertheless, parenthood provides no guaranteed assurance that adequate support will be forthcoming in times of need. The findings show that a non-negligible

minority of parents (approximately 10%) have vulnerable support networks, and research has shown that as parents age, they are likely to live further away from their children and to have less frequent contact with their children than they did early in retirement (Silverstein, Burholt, Wenger, & Bengtson, 1998).

## Summary and Conclusion

In summarizing our findings, we emphasize the impact of childlessness in old age irrespective of differences between countries. As we noted earlier, those without children are an understudied minority group. Clearly, aging without children is related to different types of social embeddedness compared with aging as a parent. At the beginning of this article, we raised questions about how this difference might be manifest in social behavior. We have presented data on community activity; contact with relatives, friends, and neighbors; and support networks. By looking at data from a range of different countries, we have tried to establish what patterns might be associated with childlessness and parenthood, over and above cultural differences.

It was suggested at the beginning that people who are childfree may have more time for social life and leisure pursuits and that as a result they may have more frequent interactions with non-kin outside the family circle, although it was recognized that they might have other types of family commitments. We hypothesized that childfree older people might have higher levels of participation in community activities.

As measures of community participation and integration, we looked at attendance at religious services, active membership in voluntary associations, and involvement in volunteer work. Women who had never married were more likely to participate in religious services, and there were some indications that men who never married had a lower level of participation in voluntary associations in some countries. But contrary to our expectations, there was no overall consistent pattern of community participation that distinguished those without children from parents.

We also looked at levels of contact with relatives, friends, and neighbors. The findings demonstrate different patterns for these three types of relationships. Older people without children have less frequent contact with relatives than parents do, suggesting that much of the contact that parents have is with adult children. Those without children have more contact with siblings, nieces, and nephews than parents tend to have. In terms of friendship, parenthood status appears to have no influence for men, but childless women

are more likely than mothers to have frequent contact with friends. Neighbor contacts again appear to be unrelated to parental or marital status, although here, too, childless married women are likely to have higher levels of contact with neighbors. So there are no consistent patterns for all those people who are childfree, but childless women have more contact with friends and neighbors.

When we look at patterns of support networks, the contrast in patterns of social embeddedness becomes most evident. The most common network types for those without children in most countries are the private restricted and local self-contained networks. Neither of these network types is typically associated with nearby family. The private restricted is the most vulnerable type of network and is associated with an absence of available informal support (Wenger, 1997a, 1997c). The local self-contained network type is household focused and typically associated with arms-length relationships with a sibling, niece or nephew, or cousin and, where there is no spouse, reliance on neighbors in an emergency (Wenger, 1991). Those who married but had no children typically have local self-contained household- or marriage-focused lifestyles; these networks can shift to become private restricted on the death of a spouse. Loneliness and social isolation are minority states among older people, but both these network types are also associated with higher levels of loneliness and social isolation (Wenger, Davies, Shahtahmasebi, & Scott, 1996). Older people without children are, therefore, more at risk of loneliness and social isolation than are parents.

For parents, the most common network types in most countries are the locally integrated and the family dependent. Locally integrated is the most robust network type, associated with involvement with relatives, friends, and neighbors and membership in local community organizations. This network type provides the most informal support. The local family dependent support network is typified by reliance on local family and sometimes shared residence with an adult child. This network type is more common among older, frailer parents and is the only network type, in the United Kingdom, that is associated with need for personal care (Wenger, 1992). Locally integrated support networks frequently shift to become local family dependent with growing dependency. Locally integrated networks are associated with an absence of social isolation and low levels of loneliness; however, local family dependent networks, in the absence of a spouse, do not protect from loneliness (Wenger, 1992).

Some of the differences we have identified may be due less to an absence of potential contacts with and support from children and more as

the result of those without children experiencing different options or adopting and being able to adopt more independent lifestyles with more involvement with siblings, nieces, nephews, cousins, friends, and other members of their communities. For those who never married or are no longer married, it may reflect the necessary development of more emotional self-sufficiency (Choi, 1994; Rempel, 1985).

To understand the long-term significance of being childfree, we need more qualitative studies (e.g. Rubinstein et al., 1991; Wenger, 2001) looking at the meanings that childless people attach to their life choices. How has being childless influenced their lives? In a qualitative study of successful aging, exploring the perceptions of those over 80 of what successful aging might be (Wenger, 1997b), respondents were asked whether they had any regrets or sadness in their lives so far. Few expressed regrets about having no children. One woman expressed regret at not having had children and another sadness about her three children who died in childhood. Two never-married men said that they would marry if they had their lives over again. For the old people in that study, good health and relationships with spouses, relatives, and friends were the most important markers of a successful old age. However, in less structured contexts, recently widowed childless men and women expressed their present wish that they had had children. The obvious difference between the childfree and parents was the absence of children and the broader range of other family relationships represented in their social networks.

In conclusion, people without children and people who are parents develop lifestyles based on the options available to them. They demonstrate similar levels of community participation, although childless women are more inclined to involvement in voluntary groups. Parents have more frequent contact with relatives, primarily with adult children, but those without children maintain contacts with a broader range of kin. There are minimal differences in the levels of contacts with friends and neighbors. In all these instances, percentage differences between countries are more pronounced than the patterns of differences between those with and without children.

When there is no need for instrumental help or personal care, the lifestyles of both those with and those without children are equally sustainable. However, the marked differences in support network types, reflecting the different membership of their networks, make significant differences in the face of impaired mobility, failing health, or increasing frailty. The difference between those who never married and those who married is clear. The importance of the spouse for those without children is self-evident. The

literature demonstrates that spouse care is the primary source of support for those who are married. Widowed parents tend to rely on the most proximate adult child. In the absence or the loss of a spouse, childlessness means that there are no network members for whom expectations of help and personal care at increasing levels of dependency exist. This means that those without children are more likely to depend on formal services at the end of life.

We need more detailed and more qualitative data than that presented in this article to give a detailed answer to the question of who supports the older people who are childless. Those without children have no obvious source of family support and may find widowhood more difficult to adapt to. There is some indication that never-married childless people are more likely than those who married to live in sibling households. In these situations, sisters tend to care more frequently for brothers than vice versa. Widowed caring siblings are in a similar situation to childless widows. Because women live longer, they are more likely to become socially isolated.

The situation of unmarried childless siblings in cultures where the three-generation household is still more common is likely to be different from cultures where independent residence is established in young adulthood. The indications are that lifelong patterns of self-sufficiency are typical. Some help may be forthcoming from collateral kin, but it is unlikely that this will be sustained over long periods. There are differences between never-married men and women. Women who never married are typically more involved in community participation and friendship networks than are never-married men (and other categories). Although private restricted and local self-contained support networks are common for those who never married, women are more likely than never-married men to have locally integrated or wider community focused types of networks. However, these distinctions are more evident in some countries than in others.

The differences in lifestyles between those who have no children and those who are parents are primarily related to the potential network members available to them and the expectations and responsibilities associated with different kinship roles. Those without children have more relationships with collateral kin than parents do. Parents, on the other hand, have more relationships with vertical kin. In the absence of a spouse, expectations are greater for vertical than for collateral kin, who may have their own vertical kin responsibilities. The differences between childless older people and older parents are not marked in terms of advantage or disadvantage while health and mobility remain good, but in the absence of good health, those without children can be disadvantaged.

## Note

1. The Australian data are from the 1992-1993 Adelaide Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ALSA) funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health, the Health Commission of South Australia, the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund, the Sandoz Foundation for Gerontological Research, and Flinders University. The Finnish data are from the 1994 Survey of Living Conditions in Finland (SFLC) carried out by Statistics Finland. The German data are from the 1990-1991 Berlin Aging Study (BASE), funded by the Free University of Berlin, the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, the Federal Ministry for Research and Technology, and the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth. The Japanese data are from the 1991 National Survey of Functional Independence (NSFI), funded by the Social Welfare and Medical Service Corporation. The Israeli data are from a national survey of people aged 60+ conducted by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics in 1985 (ICBS 60+). The Dutch data are from the 1992 Living Arrangements and Social Networks of Older Adults Survey (NESTOR-LSN), supported by a program grant from the Netherlands Program for Research on Aging (NESTOR), funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sciences and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. The Spanish data are from a 1993 national survey on informal support to the elderly carried out by the National Center for Sociological Research (CIS) in collaboration with the State Agency for Social Services (INSERSO). The English data are from the 1990-1991 Ageing in Liverpool: Health Aspects (ALPHA) study funded by the U.K. Medical Research Council. The American data are from the 1992-1994 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) funded by the Center for Population Research of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

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